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BODY:

RAMALLAH -- Israel's assassination of Fatah activist Raed Karmi on Monday was predictable. Despite Israel's having killed more than 18 Palestinians since President Yasser Arafat's call for a cease-fire on Dec. 18, there have been no Israeli civilian casualties during that time. That, according to world governments and the international press, constituted a "lull in the violence." But a lull in the violence is exactly what Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon cannot afford. He was elected in a time of crisis and knows that his rule is sustainable only in a time of crisis. For his own political survival, he will do whatever it takes, and look for any excuse, to stoke the flames of unrest and avoid a return to peace negotiations.

Hence, more than 600 Palestinians, already refugees, were recently made refugees yet again as Sharon's bulldozers razed their homes in Gaza. A day later Palestinian homes in occupied East Jerusalem were destroyed. And then, just to ensure that Palestinians are sufficiently provoked and the cycle of violence starts again, Israel assassinates Karmi.

Sharon justifies such barbaric and illegal measures in the name of "security." But as someone often considered a candidate for Israeli assassination myself, I can assure the Israeli people that neither my assassination nor any of the other 82 assassinations during the past 15 months will bring them any closer to the security they seek and deserve.

The only way for Israelis to have security is, quite simply, to end the 35-year-old Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. Israelis must abandon the myth that it is possible to have peace and occupation at the same time, that peaceful

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coexistence is possible between slave and master. The lack of Israeli security is born of the lack of Palestinian freedom. Israel will have security only after the end of occupation, not before.

Once Israel and the rest of the world understand this fundamental truth, the way forward becomes clear: End the occupation, allow the Palestinians to live in freedom and let the independent and equal neighbors of Israel and Palestine negotiate a peaceful future with close economic and cultural ties.

Let us not forget, we Palestinians have recognized Israel on 78 percent of historic Palestine. It is Israel that refuses to acknowledge Palestine's right to exist on the remaining 22 percent of land occupied in 1967. And yet it is the Palestinians who are accused of not compromising and of missing opportunities. Frankly, we are tired of always taking the blame for Israeli intransigence when all we are seeking is the implementation of international law.

And we have no faith in the United States, the provider of billions of dollars in annual aid to fund Israel's expansion of illegal colonies, the "fighter of terrorism" that supplies Israel with the F-16s and helicopter gunships used against a defenseless civilian population, the "defender of freedom and the oppressed" that coddles Sharon even as he faces war crimes charges for his responsibility in the 1982 massacre of Palestinian refugees. The role of the world's only superpower has been reduced to that of a mere spectator with nothing to offer other than a tired refrain of "Stop the violence" while doing nothing to address the root causes of that violence: denial of Palestinian freedom.

Watch as the hapless Gen. Anthony Zinni focuses his efforts on "violence" while Jewish settlers violate international law and even American policy by moving into a new illegal colony in occupied East Jerusalem. We Palestinians are not impressed.

Over the past 15 months, Israel has killed more than 900 Palestinian civilians, 25 percent of them under the age of 18. And still the United States has the audacity to veto a U.N. plan for an international protection force to stop the onslaught.

So we will protect ourselves. If Israel reserves the right to bomb us with F-16s and helicopter gunships, it should not be surprised when Palestinians seek defensive weapons to bring those aircraft down. And while I, and the Fatah movement to which I belong, strongly oppose attacks and the targeting of civilians inside Israel, our future neighbor, I reserve the right to protect myself, to resist the Israeli occupation of my country and to fight for my freedom. If Palestinians are expected to negotiate under occupation, then Israel must be expected to negotiate as we resist that occupation.

I am not a terrorist, but neither am I a pacifist. I am simply a regular guy from the Palestinian street advocating only what every other oppressed person has advocated -- the right to help myself in the absence of help from anywhere else.

This principle may well lead to my assassination. So let my position be clear in order that my death not be lightly dismissed by the world as just one more statistic in Israel's "war on terrorism." For six years I languished as a political prisoner in an Israeli jail, where I was tortured, where I hung blindfolded as an Israeli beat my genitals with a stick. But since 1994, when I believed Israel was serious about ending its occupation, I have been a tireless advocate of a peace based on fairness and equality. I led delegations of Palestinians in meetings with Israeli parliamentarians to promote mutual understanding and cooperation. I still seek peaceful coexistence between the equal and independent countries of Israel and Palestine based on full withdrawal from Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 and a just resolution to the plight of Palestinian refugees pursuant to U.N. resolutions. I do not seek to destroy Israel but only to end its occupation of my country.

The writer is general secretary of Fatah on the West Bank and was elected to the Palestinian Legislative Council.

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